

# “The Doors That Cannot Be Closed”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Behold, I set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut”  
(Revelation 3:8).**

Several years ago I visited the Island of Patmos, which is located in the Aegean Sea not far from the ancient city of Ephesus and the capital of Turkey, Istanbul. Patmos is a beautiful Island with sandy beaches and an almost tropical topography. It is home today to a number of movie stars and celebrities who have houses and villas there.

In the time of the Roman Empire, Patmos was a convict island where prisoners were forced to work in the mines or marble quarries. At night they slept in convict huts. Patmos was similar to the prison of Alcatraz that is located near San Francisco. There was not a great need for a lot of guards on Patmos, since the prisoners were surrounded by the great Aegean Sea and there was really no way the prisoners could have escaped.

There is an ancient tradition in the church that the island of Patmos was the place where the disciple John was imprisoned. John wrote the Book of Revelation from this island. John says nothing about his imprisonment, but there is one phrase that reveals his hidden feeling. When he dreams of heaven, he says, “And the sea shall be no more.” Now, to most of us this would be a very limiting view of heaven. But to a person imprisoned on an island, the sea must have been a terrible symbol of his bondage, the shining but terrible jailer that confined him to that island.

## I.

The Book of Revelation contains a series of letters to seven of the churches of Asia Minor (Turkey) in which the author of the book comments on both the strengths and weaknesses of each of these churches. The Scripture this morning is taken from the letter to the church at Philadelphia. In this letter John says to the church at Philadelphia: “Behold, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it.” To be sure John uses these words to encourage the church in that place, but surely they must have had some meaning in his personal life. His imprisonment had shut doors all around him. Doors of opportunity, happiness, and privilege had been closed to him, but there in the midst of his imprisonment he saw a vision and heard a voice that cried, “Behold, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it.”

In Frederick Buechner’s book *Telling Secrets: A Memoir* there is a section in which Buechner shares with his readers the two most defining and horrible secrets of his own life: his father’s suicide when Buechner was only ten years old and of his daughter’s struggle with anorexia, which came much later in his life. There is a section in his book in which he speaks of the Tower of London in England. One of the oldest parts of the tower is known as the White Tower, which was built by William the Conqueror. On the second floor of the tower there is a small Norman chapel called the Chapel of St. John. It is very bare and simple, built of stone with twelve stone pillars and a vaulted ceiling. There is a cool, silvery light that comes in through the arched windows. The chapel is very silent and very still and you cannot enter it without being struck by the feeling of purity and peace it gives. It is a holy place.

But that is not all there is to the White Tower. Directly below the chapel is the most terrible of all the tower’s dungeons. It has a heavy door that blocks out all light and ventilation. It measures four feet square by four feet high so that a prisoner has no way either to stand upright or to lie down. The room is known as “little ease.”

There are many people today who live in a prison cell like “little ease.” Some are imprisoned by addiction to alcohol or drugs. Others may find themselves locked into jobs that give no real satisfaction, dead-end relationships that seem to go nowhere. Others may be prisoner to past events in their lives that block them from the future. Buechner found himself in such a place where he could not escape the fact of his father’s suicide. One of the most chilling aspects of this kind of imprisonment, writes Buechner, is that eventually “little ease” becomes home. That is to say that the prisons in which we live, terrible as they are, finally become places of familiarity to us so that the only thing that seems worse to us than the situation in which we find ourselves is the possibility of freedom.

That is why this verse in John’s letter to the church at Philadelphia strikes such a responsive chord in each of us. It speaks of doors that cannot be closed.

## II.

In the first place it reminds us that in each of us there are two distinct parts in our lives. There is what the Apostle Paul called “the outward person” and what he called the “inner

person.” Sometimes the “outer person” can suffer great difficulty. Paul understood this. In his missionary journeys he had been shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, and placed in prison. He had seen the very churches he established turned against him. His last written testimony, the so-called “Pastoral Letters” which were written when he was in prison in Rome.

But Paul understood that there was more to life than the “outer person” and what happens to us on the outside. He believed that there was an “inner person” as well. To be sure, the Roman Emperor Nero had a long arm, but there were doors in Paul’s life that could not be closed. Listen to his words: “Being rooted and grounded in love, strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passes all knowledge.” That is a door that cannot be closed. In Reinhold Niebuhr's classic work *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr speaks of God’s grace not only as forgiveness but as power as well. That is to say, God’s grace not only gives us the ability to turn our back from the past to the future, it also gives us the power to shatter the doors that close us from the lives that God would have us live.

### III.

There is another dimension to this open door and it is the power to triumph even in the midst of great trouble. Certainly, I had that feeling as I walked into that dark cave there on the Isle of Patmos. As I looked into that barren darkness where John had been imprisoned for all those years, I could not help but marvel at the majesty of what he had created. Out of the most terrible kind of darkness came one of the most majestic books in the New Testament, the vision of a “New Jerusalem,” where there would be no more suffering, death or sorrow (Revelation 21). There in that cave John saw a beast rising out of the ocean, but more importantly he saw the power of God in Christ to overcome even the most powerful empire in the world, so that in the end John could affirm “Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.”

Several years ago I heard Reynolds Price speak at Spirit Square as part of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library’s Novello program. During his address he read from some of his novels, most of which are rooted in North Carolina. During his remarks he spoke about the illness that he had suffered some years ago. One day his doctors found a cancerous tumor in his spinal chord. When it was removed, it left him paralyzed from the waist down. Price commented that the nights were the most difficult time for him. His pain was so great that he could not sleep. For a long time, he observed, he took a series of medication to ease the pain. But these left him in a narcotic daze to the point that he finally decided he would have to find a way to move the pain to the side of his consciousness. Often, he would lie awake unable to sleep. In order to help pass the time away he would recite poetry, much of which he had learned as a boy from his mother and grandmother. He quoted from memory Milton’s great poem, “On His Blindness:

“When I consider how my light is spent,  
E’re half my days, in this dark world and wide.”

Reynolds Price's illness became the occasion for an awakening of faith in him that is chronicled in his book *A Whole New Life*. Today his books and speeches reflect this perspective that he achieved through great suffering.

#### IV.

Another dimension to this door that cannot be closed is the power of God to work his way in human history. Certainly John understood this. He was very conscious of the power of Rome and the persecution of the church that placed him on this beautiful but remote island. And yet, John could not abandon this hope that is contained in his vision of the power of God to destroy the hand of an evil empire.

Tomorrow we will commemorate the fifth anniversary of the events of September 11, 2001, that have marked our lives in so many ways. The specter of terrorism is very real to us and no doubt the events of tomorrow will remind us in fresh ways of the terrible evil that we face today in the form of terrorism. As many have reminded us, the War on Terrorism is a war against a form of totalitarianism that is not dissimilar from the great wars of the Twentieth Century against fascism in Germany and Communism in the Soviet Union. Now, most of us would agree that the war against terrorism must be fought with a great deal of vigilance. We will not win by appeasement. But terrorism, like communism and fascism, cannot finally succeed because it lacks the inner power to build a civilization. It can create death but not life and only life can sustain people.

In his remarkable "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. observed that in human history there is a "moral arc" and that arc inevitably swings to justice.

So in this terrifying and often confusing world we would do well to hold on to this great vision that the Revelation of John sets before us.

"Behold, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it."

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen!